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# Squaring Off On Thailand's Golden Triangle

Thailand has redrawn the boundaries of the notorious Golden Triangle, the untamed hill region of Southeast Asia that for the past two decades has supplied tons of heroin to the world's junkies.

The Thais finally have gotten tough on dope traffickers.

In fact, with the encouragement provided by U.S. financing and expertise, the Thai government has cracked down so severely on drug exporters and opium-poppy growers that Thailand is now a net importer of heroin.

The 35 tons of opium produced in the country last year—half the amount produced in 1980—weren't sufficient to satisfy the needs of Thailand's estimated 500,000 heroin addicts, roughly 1 percent of the population.

Production and refining of opium into heroin now are largely confined to Burma, which produces about 500 tons a year. Laos, the third leg of the triangle, accounts for about 50 tons a year.

On a trip to Thailand, my associate Dale Van Atta visited the area

where Thailand, Burma and Laos meet. He talked with border guards, slipped into Burma briefly, and talked with intelligence sources in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Here's what he learned:

- In bloody battles fought in January, 1982, the Thais managed to push the 3,000-man army of drug warlord Chang Chi-fu across the border into Burma.

- The expulsion of Chang effectively ended the local domination of mercenary armies in northwestern Thailand.

- In the last four years, the Thai government has succeeded in cutting by half the acreage of poppy fields in Thailand.

The Thai crackdown is a joint effort with U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents. "We have pushed all active refineries back to Burma," a U.S. official in Chiang Mai boasted. "Our intelligence is pretty good, so they don't last long if they start up in Thailand."

Chang and the other dope traffickers are still a threat. Thai government informers have been buried alive, drawn and quartered and suffered other grisly deaths. When the Thais offered a \$23,000 reward for Chang's capture, he countered with an offer to pay cash for killing Americans. In 1980, a DEA agent's wife was gunned down in Chiang Mai.

Much of the heroin that comes

out of the triangle still travels through Thailand. But an American official in Bangkok noted that Thailand does a better job at interdiction than the United States does within its own borders.

A single seizure usually brings in more drugs than a stateside DEA agent is likely to see in his entire career. In fact, the week Van Atta was there, the Thai government seized 265 kilograms of heroin from a single shipment, worth \$500 million in the United States.

It is only fitting that the United States has taken a major support role in the Thai crackdown on heroin. A classified DEA report blames the long American presence in Southeast Asia for creating both the need and the greed that nurtured the Golden Triangle in the first place.

"It was not until the buildup of U.S. forces in Indochina in the latter part of the 1960s that heroin production became well-established in the Golden Triangle," the report said. "U.S. military personnel in Vietnam and Thailand provided a ready market for the heroin."

Another DEA report noted that "many U.S. armed forces personnel returned from the conflict in Vietnam not only with heroin habits, but also with the knowledge of where to purchase heroin and smuggle it into the U.S."